

MEAD:
SACRED NECTAR OF THE GODS
DRINK OF HEROES & KINGS



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One of nine bronze drinking horns decorated with gold that were found in a war-chieftain's tomb in Hochdorf, Germany.

In ancient times alcohol was considered a sacred substance. Fermentation was not understood, so alcoholic beverages were considered magical drinks that were due to a blessing from the Gods. Its effects on human consciousness were thought to bring one more deeply in touch with the mystical and spiritual aspects of our world. Even today our stronger alcoholic beverages are referred to as “spirits”, and only religious organizations were permitted to produce and consume alcohol during American Prohibition. The belief that alcohol is a sacred substance which brings mankind together with each other and Deity runs deeply throughout most world cultures; although the ease with which it is mass produced in modern times and a far better understanding of the fermentation process has led to a less reverent attitude that unfortunately facilitates excess and abuse. This is a shame, as the handcrafting of a delicious wine, mead or beer can be an artistic accomplishment in which one should take pride, and were these arts better understood and the beverage treated with respect, there would be much less alcoholism in the world today.

Alcoholic beverages have been around a long time. The oldest known recipe for beer is incorporated into a hymn to the Sumerian goddess of brewing, Ninkasi. It was found on a clay tablet that dates back to 1800BC. A large brewery dating back to 1000AD was recently unearthed in Peru. Winemaking flourished 7000 years ago in Shang Dynasty China, mead jars circa 600BC have been excavated in Turkey, and the ancient Rig Veda of India has entire chapters dedicated to the production and ritual drinking of “soma”, commonly thought to be either mead or a mixture of mead and hallucinogenic mushrooms.

Mead was arguably the first and most widespread alcoholic beverage, and was probably discovered by ancient people who found honey that had spontaneously fermented after coming into contact with rainwater. The practice of drinking mead spread up from India through Persia via the Zoroastrians. A tomb in Turkey found to be that of the legendary King Midas had such a well preserved container of mead that the recipe was actually reverse engineered and produced by a modern brewery. The Greeks and Hittites enjoyed mead and the custom also travelled via trade to the Phoenicians, Egyptians and Ethiopians, and elsewhere throughout Eurasia and northern Africa.

There are five regions in the world which produce extremely gelatinous, concentrated honey which has been revered by the cultures which discovered and used it. The Greeks called theirs “Ambrosia” and considered it to be the food of the Gods. They were not too far off – the natural antibacterial and healthy properties of these concentrated types of honey were certainly the next best thing to having immortality bestowed upon one, and they are marketed as health supplements even today. New Zealand's manuka honey and China's royal jelly are other examples.

Mead was popular in Greece and a particular type of mead made with spices and grapes (hippocras) originated there. From Greece the custom moved to Rome, and there are several Roman recipes for mead found in the writings of Pliny the Elder.

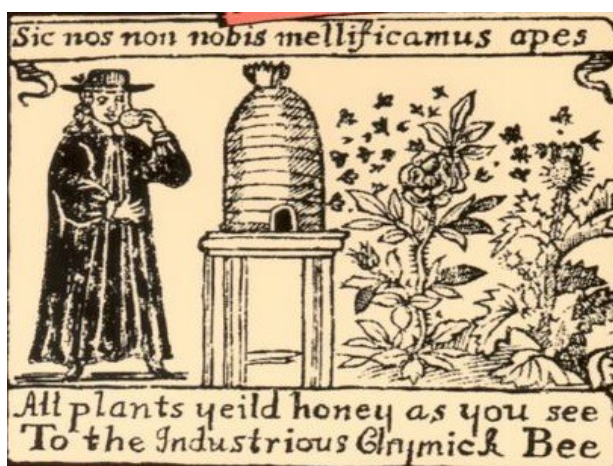
One of the most familiar memes when one thinks of mead is that of the archtypical Valkyrie handing a hero a horn of mead in Valhalla. It was the most sacred and beloved drink of the Vikings and was said to bring poetic inspiration, protect one from harm, and preserve health and memory. Sharing this sacred beverage with the Gods and the people assembled was celebrated in religious rites known as “Blots” and “Sumbels”. These rituals, re-created today by modern practitioners of the pre-Christian belief system widely known as Asatru, are still believed to build community and imbue it with a sense of the divine, much as Christians use bread and wine to celebrate their own Eucharist. Indeed, it is thought that the similarity between the two rituals were one reason why so much of Northern Europe was successfully converted to Christianity.

The custom of the honeymoon also originated with the Vikings, who had a warrior culture. The ancient Scandinavians believed that if the couple drank mead for an entire month after their wedding (the “honey moon”); their firstborn would be a son who would grow up to become a much-needed warrior who would protect them when they were old. This was later found out to be a truism: mead actually does change a woman's body chemistry to be more acidic, making her chance of having a son much higher.

Even as the civilization of the Vikings waned and evolved; mead continued to be associated with heroes, royalty, knights and noble ladies throughout most of Northern Europe during the Renaissance. This is one reason why it is a popular drink at Renaissance faires, and this is where most people first get to try it. Until very recently, mead was such a niche beverage

in America that examples served at these faires were often very bland and boring; even deliberately watered down to keep the excessive sugar and alcohol from creating a “mad dogs and Englishmen” situation on hot summer days. One of the more well known brands, Bunnratty, isn't mead at all but simply white wine mixed after fermentation is complete with additional honey and herbs. Modern faires which have alcohol permits now offer superior quality and variety as the public's awareness of the beverage has increased.

Two events served to begin the restoration of mead's reputation in the American public eye – the legalization of homebrewing as effected in 1978 by the Carter administration, and the very nearly simultaneous rise in popularity of a medieval re-enactment organization known as the Society for Creative Anachronism. This organization, begun in 1969, became very popular in the 1970s as an outgrowth of the publishing of Tolkien's “Lord of the Rings” fiction and the subsequent “Dungeons and Dragons” craze. Members dress in medieval clothing and re-create the arts, sciences, combats and events of the Middle Ages.



Those SCA members who have turned their hands to brewing have made the delightful discovery that mead can easily be made to their own tastes - fruity; spicy; extra flavorful; bold or mild; sweet or dry as preferred; and offering a variety of flavors that would probably boggle the minds of either a medieval European brewer or a modern American unfamiliar with the beverage. Successful delicious meads have been made with everything from lychee fruit to chipotle peppers, pumpkin, carrots and even chocolate.

Members of the American Homebrewing Association who make mead discovered the same thing, and while these two organizations are very different in how they foster and evaluate the art of mead making, there is a great deal of overlap and knowledge to be shared between them. National AHA competitions and a new national mead judge certification track ensure that practitioners are constantly honing their excellence in the art. Many professional brewmasters such as Garrett Oliver of the Brooklyn Brewery got their start in local homebrewing clubs – Oliver is a founding member of the New York City

Homebrewer's Guild. These days homebrewing is a flourishing hobby worldwide. Equipment and ingredients are quite easy to find on the Internet, or locally through the AHA website. Books and web pages abound with excellent recipes. You will find many links and references at the end of this handout where you can search further.

The SCA takes homebrewing a few steps further - into the past. Since their focus is not merely on homebrewing good beverages but also on the study of how these were produced "in period" (that is, prior to the year 1600AD), brewers are required not only to know how to produce these with modern equipment and ingredients, but also how to reproduce ancient recipes. SCA competitions do not only draw on the AHA/BJCP standards but also on the trueness to an original recipe which has been researched by the brewer and then redacted. While in general modern equipment, ingredients and sanitation methods are used, an SCA brewer who can reproduce period recipes is held in great esteem.

The SCA is not alone in seeking these challenges. In 1988 the Anchor Steam brewery successfully redacted and commercially reproduced the Ninkasi beer recipe with the assistance of professors from the University of Pennsylvania, and in 2003 the Dogfishhead brewery did the same thing with the hybrid of mead and beer that was found in King Midas' grave jars. The latter is still being brewed, and if you try you can perhaps get your hands on a bottle of the 2004 batch of Midas Touch.

Making one's own mead is easy and can be a very rewarding experience. Familiarity with the different types of mead, ensuring that one has quality ingredients and given a basic understanding of the mead brewing process, you can have your own batch of 25 to 30 bottles worth of your own making ready in a year's time.



Classifications of Mead

Most people begin by making what's called a “traditional” mead – simply honey, water, yeast, and if necessary some form of yeast nutrient. Familiarity with the other styles of mead is helpful if you decide to expand your flavor horizons. Knowledge of classification is also key if one is going to enter mead in competitions.

Traditional: this is a mead that is exclusively flavored with honey, water, and yeast.

Varietal: a mead that has been flavored with a specific variety of honey that is known for a unique and distinct flavor. Examples are orange blossom, tupelo, basswood, chestnut or manuka.

Sack: mead that has been aged in port wine barrels, or a mixture of mead and wine. Usually extremely sweet – sometimes fortified with extra honey after fermentation.

Cyser: mead that is either flavored with apples and/or has an apple juice base. It is not a coincidence that the word is similar to “cider”.

Pyment: a mead that is flavored with grapes and/or has a grape juice base.

Hippocras: a spiced pyment that originated in Greece. Ascribed healing properties, it was associated by name with the same luminary who gave the medical profession their famous oath.

Melomel: a mead that has some sort of fruit flavor. Usually the most popular and easy to find melomels are berry flavored.

Methglin: a mead flavored with spices and/or herbs. Popular flavors are ginger, vanilla, rosemary, cinnamon and clove.

Acer: a mead made with maple syrup. Some meads are also made with other types of tree sap or syrups made from tree sap, such as birch or hazel.

Rhodomel: a mead flavored with rose petals. Other flowers sometimes used to flavor meads are lavender and jasmine.

Weirdomel: a funny name modern brewers will give to an experimental flavor that just doesn't fit anywhere else. Pumpkin, smoked chipotle, chocolate and carrot meads would definitely qualify as weirdomels.

A few words on ingredients

As with any recipe, a mead's quality depends upon the nature and quality of the ingredients used.

Water should be pure and free of additional chemicals like chlorine or flouride; spring water is best. One of the best meads I ever did was with mineral water pumped from an underground spring upstate.

Honey can be simple bulk clover, baker's grade wildflower, or a more pricey varietal that will add it's own unique flavor to the mead. Most people will use varietals in traditional meads where the delicate flavors will shine and not be overwhelmed by fruit or spices. In general the darker a honey is, the more potent it's flavor will be. Beware of vendors who try to sell you high-priced varietals like “pumpkin”, “raspberry” and the like – even if these honeys were produced exclusively in fields of flowers belonging to the given plant, it is important to remember that the flavor of a flower is far more delicate than that of a fruit. Pumpkin honey will not taste like pumpkins and raspberry honey will not taste like raspberries no matter how many people want it to be that way. There are some exceptions to this rule, like chestnut, basswood, eucalyptus and tupelo, but they are exceptions.

Fruit is usually frozen before use to break down the cell walls and concentrate the flavor. Be aware that some fruit like cherries and peaches should be pitted before use, as the pits contain cyanide! Another thing to watch out for are the levels of pectin and malic acid in the fruit you plan to use. Pectin can cause a haze (strawberries are notorious for this) that is difficult to get rid of without the use of an enzyme or careful heating. Some people prefer to add the pasteurized fruit after fermentation is complete to avoid this, but I prefer all flavors to be incorporated when the yeast is pitched as a personal preference.

An awareness of the level of malic acid in one's fruit is necessary because the introduction of a certain bacteria can cause a “malo-lactic fermentation” - the bacteria convert all the malic acid in your batch to lactic acid. The result is a rather scary “lava light” effect in your carboy and a mead that will taste like chardonnay. Winemakers who wish to make chardonnay intentionally introduce this bacteria, but sometimes it happens all by itself with fruit that contains a lot of malic acid such as peaches or apples. There are various ways to prevent malo-lactic fermentation if you wish to do so.

Spices can be used either fresh or dry, and there are tricks to learn depending on the nature of the each particular spice. For example, cinnamon powder or sticks do not diffuse throughout a mead anywhere near as well as Atomic Fireball candies or Red Hots. Cloves and mint are powerful, so using measurements that one is accustomed to with other spices can result in a mead that tastes like Nyquil. I am known for my heavy hand when adding ginger to my meads because I just happen to love ginger.

BLUE BLAZES 2009



BLUEBERRY/GINGER MEAD

Some judges have screamed their heads off at the level of ginger heat in my meads, others have swooned and awarded ribbons. It's all good to say I make my meads for me, but I certainly can't drink the whole batch by myself, so as a result I have worked out a personal grading system of exactly how much fresh ginger root to add to my batches when I am making them for self or others. One trick for drawing the flavor out of herbs and spices is to macerate them – place them in a jar which is then filled with some form of alcohol or other liquid.

Yeast: this mysterious little critter which has characteristics of both plants and animals, is the ingredient that gives the mead it's true nature. While there are certainly other dependencies incorporated by the amount and ratio of other ingredients, it is the yeast that ultimately determines how sweet or dry your mead is and what it's flavor as an alcoholic beverage will be. Either beer or wine yeast strains can be used to produce mead (bread yeast is not recommended) but most people use white wine yeasts. If you use a champagne yeast, you will get a champagne-like mead – very dry, and often spontaneously self-carbonating if you get the sugar ratios right, which can be an unpleasant surprise if you bottle too soon! If you use a yeast used to create Liebfraumilch, your mead will taste like a honey-flavored, fruit-flavored or spice-flavored Liebfraumilch. I brewed a pyment with golden sultana raisins and Lalvin Narbonne 71B-1122 yeast one year that ended up being a dead ringer for Harvey's Bristol Cream.

Adjuncts

There are various natural and synthetic agents which can also be added to meads for the purposes of affecting flavor, appearance and purity. Sometimes it is appropriate to add toasted oak chips to get the effect of barrel aging. Sometimes one needs to balance the different types of acid in a mead, clarify it, or stop or restart the fermentation process.

The process:

The actual brewing process can be done in about two hours. Sanitization is key – make sure all equipment, containers and tools which are used in the process have been well sanitized with various products made for that purpose. Much of the time is spent waiting for your mix of ingredients and water to come to a boil while stirring to mix them well (quotes from the three weird sisters scene in MacBeth optional) and skimming off the impurities as they rise to the top. Some people do not like to bring their batches to a full boil because the excessive heat destroys the delicate flavors imparted by the honey, but most meadmakers will wait for a phenomenon known as the “hot break” which ensures that pasteurization has occurred.



As wine yeasts take longer to work than beer yeasts, the general policy with most meads is to let the batch age for a year. Periodically the mead is checked for fermentation activity, clarity and taste. As the yeast break available sugars down into alcohol and carbon dioxide, they die and together with heavier elements drop to the bottom of the carboy. They are referred to as the “lees” and must be periodically racked off to clear the mead and prevent off flavors. Racking is siphoning off the bulk of the batch into another sanitized carboy and then disposing of the lees. This should be done a minimum of 3 times throughout the year for a decent tasting mead.

When the year is up and it is time to bottle your batch, sanitize your bottles and corks and fire up your label processing software! You will get five 750ml sized wine bottles per gallon of mead depending on how much of the lees you had to discard. As with wine, it is best to cork your mead and store it on it's side in a dark and cool place like a cellar or garage.

I hope you have found this discourse on mead informative and entertaining and worthwhile. Whether you raise your glass and say “Wassail”, “Skoal”, “Prosit”, “CinCin” or simply “Cheers”, perhaps someday you will experience the rush of pride and joy that only comes of doing so with a delicious beverage of your own making.

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Making Mead (Honey wine): History, Recipes, Methods & Equipment, Roger A. Morse, Wicwas Press, LLC; March 1992, **ISBN-10:** 1878075047

A Sip Through Time: A Collection Of Old Brewing Recipes, Cindy Renfrow, Cindy Renfrow June 1, 1995, **ISBN-10:** 0962859834

The Compleat Meadmaker, Ken Schramm, Brewers Publications; July 25, 2003, **ISBN-10:** 0937381802

Brewing Mead: Wassail in Mazers of Mead, Robert Gayre with Charlie Papazian, Brewers Publications; January 25, 1986, **ISBN-10:** 0937381004

Mad About Mead: Nectar of the Gods, Pamela Spence, Llewellyn Publications; September 1, 2002, **ISBN-10:** 1567186831

The Complete Joy of Homebrewing, Charlie Papazian, Collins Living; 3 Sub edition September 23, 2003, **ISBN-10:** 0060531053

Brewing websites:

Organizations and clubs:

The American Homebrewing Association:

<http://www.beertown.org/homebrewing/index.html>

The Beer Judge Certification Program:

<http://www.bjcp.org/>

The New York City Homebrewer's Guild (Manhattan):

<http://hbd.org/nychg/>

The Malted Barley Appreciation Society (Brooklyn):

<http://hbd.org/mbas/>

Brewer's East End Revival (Suffolk):

<http://hbd.org/beer/>

Local homebrewing supplies:

Brooklyn Homebrew:

<http://brooklynhomebrew.blogspot.com/>

Brooklyn Brew Shop:

<http://brooklynbrewshop.com/>

Brewshop at Cornell's (Eastchester)

<http://www.cornells.com>

Party Creations (Red Hook)

<http://www.partycreations.net/>

Maltose Express: (Monroe, CT)

<http://www.maltose.com/>

KEDCO/Brews Brothers (Farmingdale):

<http://www.herbpress.com/contact.asp>

Karp's Homebrew (East Northport):

<http://www.homebrewshop.com/>

Brewser's Den:

<http://www.brewersden.com>

SCA brewing sites:

The East Kingdom Brewer's Guild:

<http://www.panix.com/~ekbrew/>

Medieval/Renaissance Brewing Homepage:

<http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/brewing.html>

Raudins Publishing:

<http://www.raudins.com/BrewBooks/>

Good general reference sites:

Gotmead.com:

<http://www.gotmead.com/>

Jack Keller's Winemaking Page:

<http://winemaking.jackkeller.net/>

How To Brew, a free online book on brewing:

<http://www.howtobrew.com/intro.html>

Free label making software:

Avery still has a nice freeware available to create your own brewing labels here:

http://www.avery.com/avery/en_us/Templates-&-Software/Software/Avery-DesignPro-for-PC.htm

Some graphics used were from the Goode Cookery "Feast For The Eyes"

Medieval clip art archives::

<http://www.godecookery.com/afeast/afeast.htm>